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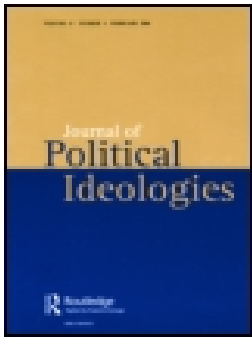
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The local dimension in the degrowth literature. A critical discussion

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ABSTRACT

Degrowth is establishing itself as a theory within the ecological and post-development scholarship. At the core of degrowth is a local-centric perspective, whereby small urban agglomerations are considered as the key actors of the political and economic system of an imagined post-consumerist and post-capitalist society. Degrowth proponents thus argue that the fundamental steps to achieve a truly democratic, socially just and ecological society should be taken at local level. However, in the degrowth theory a thorough debate about why the local level would be the most suitable spatial units to achieve degrowth is scarce. The importance of the small urban size appears to be axiomatic, rather than supported by substantive arguments. By engaging with non-mainstream strands of green political thought, this paper critically reflects upon the local-centred perspective at the core of the degrowth theory, identifying its main practical and theoretical shortcomings.

Introduction

The theory of degrowth has increasingly grasped the attention of scholars, activists and politicians interested in finding an alternative to capitalism. Without rehearsing a definition of degrowth – a task that has been fulfilled extensively in several contributions¹ – it suffices to say that this project entails ‘a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society’ and urges for ‘a paradigm shift from the general and unlimited pursuit of economic growth to a concept of “right-sizing” the global and national economies’ to sustainable levels.² According to Latouche,³ one of the most prominent degrowth theorists, degrowth ‘is not a concept, and in any case, not one that is symmetrical to growth’; rather, it is ‘a political slogan with theoretical implications’. The author underscores that ‘the project of a degrowth society is [...] eminently revolutionary. It is about quite as much a change of culture, as of the legal system and the relations of production’.⁴ To pave the way for a degrowth society, it is paramount to achieve a radical change in values and ideas that entails ‘an active process of liberating thought, desires and institutions from the logic of growth, productivism and accumulation for accumulation’s sake’ – what Latouche calls ‘decolonization of the imaginary’.⁵ The ultimate objective of the degrowth theory is the construction of ‘convivial societies that are autonomous and economical in both the North and the South’.⁶

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Although some authors reject the definition of degrowth as an ideology,⁷ it can be considered as such if we understand ideology as a coherent set of principles and beliefs underlying a specific worldview. In this case, the ideological mainstays of degrowth are ‘the critiques of the technological society, or large organizations and the consumer culture [...], as well as the Castoriadian notion of autonomy and the “social imaginary”’.⁸

In tune with other streams of radical ecology scholarships, the degrowth theory figures the local as the appropriate scale to start such a cultural revolution. The local – and even the sub-local level – i.e. communities, neighbourhoods etc. – is considered as the optimal scale where alternatives to consumerism can be experimented.⁹ In effect, given the impracticability of a forceful subversion of the capital system, the strategy of ‘dissidence’ through bottom-up local activities seems the only viable option.¹⁰

Although localization is part and parcel of the degrowth strategic programme, a closer analysis of the degrowth theory reveals that its local-centric perspective is supported neither by a thorough discussion about the concrete possibility to achieve degrowth at local level and what this implies from a political perspective, nor by empirical data supporting this claim. As will be discussed in detail in the ensuing sections, two main flaws affect the degrowth theory. On the one hand, a fully-fledged political theory of degrowth has not been produced; rather, degrowth proponents draw on other thinkers’ theoretical propositions, without elaborating them in an organic and consistent theoretical framework. On the other hand, there is a lack of a clear-cut programme about how to achieve degrowth.¹¹ Such a vague vision has left room for a panoply of policy solutions at upper administrative levels – e.g. labour and social policies devoted to improve citizens’ well-being – as well as innovative experiences at lower levels, such as cohousing systems or local currencies.¹² For those reasons, the role of localities in the pursuit of an ecological, democratic and fair society has not been thoroughly defined.

As a result, some authors have raised criticisms of the centrality of the local level in the degrowth theory.¹³ In the attempt to expand this thread of research, this article seeks to provide a critical appraisal of the local-centric perspective characterizing the degrowth theory. It should be specified that here the purpose is not to confute the whole localist outlook of the degrowth theory, since localities are places where alternative social, political and economic practices can be – and have been – tried out. Rather, this article aims at engaging critically with the degrowth’s localist argument by pinpointing its theoretical and practical weaknesses.

The article is organized as follows. After this introduction, the concept of relocalization as defined in the theory of degrowth is discussed, paying attention to how economic activities and political and governing functions are conceived at the local level. In the following section, a critical assessment of the local-centric perspective of the degrowth literature is laid out. Concluding observations are drawn in the final section.

The centrality of the local level in degrowth literature

In several contributions in the field of green thought the local – and often the sub-local – level is deemed as the basic spatial unit of an eco-compatible society.¹⁴ In line with this perspective, towns, villages, communities and communes are seen as the places where a truly ecological socio-political society could be built upon. The critique of the big dimension and the complementary myth of smallness assume a relevant conceptual role

in green localist approaches. In his influential book, *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher¹⁵ criticizes the ‘idolatry of giantism’ characterizing society at that time – although the author warns against straying in the ‘idolatry of smallness’. In effect, many green thinkers see cities as the cause of high levels of pollution, degradation of the land due to waste disposal and an excessive demand of resources.¹⁶ In some theoretical streams, the idea of descaling and decentralizing is pushed to the extremes, indicating sub-local entities, such as the community – or the commune – as the kernel of a green society. In this respect, Bahro¹⁷ argues that the political-institutional centrality of the communes is due to various reasons: first, the commune is not ‘economically expansive’, hence minimizing the environmental impact; second, it is ‘the obvious focus for political decentralization’; third, the commune is ‘anthropologically favourable’, in that it suits best human nature.¹⁸

Such contempt for the greatness and the parallel celebration of the smallness also emerge in many accounts of degrowth. In their review of the French degrowth movement, Martinez-Alier et al.¹⁹ note that Charbonneau, one of the precursors of the degrowth thinking, denounced the ‘gigantism’ of contemporary societies, witnessed in ‘the big city, the big factory, the accumulation of capital, the development of advertising and bureaucracy’. As a result, in the theory of degrowth, suburbs, villages, communities, neighbourhoods, and towns are indicated as the geographical units where the transition towards a degrowth society can – and should – start. However, as Latouche²⁰ explains,

the local is not a closed microcosm, but a linkage in a network of horizontal, virtuous and solidarity relations, aiming to experiment with practices of democratic reinforcement capable to resist the liberal domination. In other words, it is about laboratories of critical analysis and self-government for the defence of the common good.

The centrality of localities would be established through a process of re-localization of both economic activities and political competencies.²¹ Economic re-localization implies the re-allocation of the production and supply of goods and services at the local level, while political re-localization requires the decentralization of government functions in order to strengthen citizens’ participation in the decision-making. In addition, the cultural and social life of citizens should be relocalized, through the recreation of a sense of belonging to their territory – what Latouche²² defines as the ‘territorial anchorage’. The economic and political facets of the concept of relocalization are examined in the ensuing sub-sections.

Economic downscaling

From an economic perspective, re-localization would be enacted by establishing a decentralized economic system where local alternative – i.e. non-capitalist – economic activities would constitute its backbone. A localized economy would then enable the tackling of resource problems by reducing the distance between production and consumption.²³ In so doing, the environmental impact of productive activities would be contained, while enabling the revitalization of local economies. In other words, economic downscaling would culminate in the creation of a ‘local economic autonomy’, resting on ‘food [...], financial and economic self-sufficiency’.²⁴ More precisely, such a local economic self-sufficiency would be achieved by setting up locally based economic initiatives: local currencies, such as LETS²⁵ and Time Banks,²⁶ co-housing²⁷ and local

cooperatives²⁸ – just to mention a few. The economic activities proposed to degrowing echo Carlsson and Manning's²⁹ 'nowtopias', i.e. voluntary communities operating outside the capitalist framework.³⁰ These experiences subvert the tenets of capitalism: 'private property and wage labour and the logic of exchange-for-profit'.³¹ More importantly, local economic 'forms of resistance', such as local alternative currencies, draw on the 'principle of employment and production subsidiarity' elaborated by Mignot-Lefebvre and Lefebvre,³² which maintains that the local level should be preferred, whenever possible, for the benefit of the society.³³

Other authors go even further, proposing a radical overhaul of the capitalist productive system and the associated consumerist paradigm. For instance, Trainer,³⁴ with his 'Simpler Way' project, envisages a society where individuals 'live very frugally and self-sufficiently, in economies that are mostly small and have highly localised, self-sufficient and cooperative ways under social control – i.e. not determined by market forces or profit), and without any economic growth'.³⁵ The 'Simpler Way' foresees a degrowth society hinging on the 'micro-economy of town, suburb and neighbourhood', suggesting a localism at an even lower scale.³⁶ Such small collectively-run local economies will enable to achieve self-sufficiency, as the bulk of the food and products will be produced locally, with little need to import.³⁷

By proposing a localized economy as well as the contraction of consumption, degrowth proponents take a stand against capitalism. Notably, the functioning of capitalism is maintained by the never-ending linear process of production-consumption-waste. Continuous consumption equates with continuous production, which in turn means the relentless exploitation and disposal of resources. Ultimately, the self-reinforcing relation between production and consumption has engendered huge and irreversible environmental damages as well as severe social impacts, due to the unequal distribution of wealth. However, the rejection of the consumerist paradigm at the core of the degrowth theory does mean neither a return to a primitivistic state nor a voluntary poverty. Rather, it means to avoid the endless and fast-paced consumerist frenzy. Furthermore, the decentralization of the economy – taking the form of local economic decision-making, local ownership of economic activities, the deployment of locally based resources – is seen as the antidote to the adverse social and environmental effects caused by globalization.³⁸ However, the degrowth theory does not propose autarchic local economies: as Latouche³⁹ posits, 'the alternative to productivism' should be developed at different scales 'in a concerted and complementary way'.

The relocation of the economy would also reduce the exploitation of the land, by decommodifying natural goods. Here, the concept of commons emerges strongly: the idea that local natural resources should and could be placed under community control, subtracting them from private control, would make local populations free to decide how to manage their territory, with no pressure for economic return.⁴⁰

To complement the degrowth economic programme, degrowth proponents have drawn the traits of an alternative political system, outlined in the following section.

Political decentralization

For degrowth advocates, the economic downscaling would be accompanied by the establishment of a 'local ecological democracy',⁴¹ that is a highly devolved and participatory

system of policy-making and decision-making. This option is deemed as more viable and desirable than the ideas of an ecological totalitarian order or of a democracy on a global scale, in that democracy can better work in small-sized and value-driven localities.⁴² In this respect, according to degrowth proponents, the local level is pivotal to delivering on two important democratic tenets: the “personalization of citizens” relations’ and the ‘the embedding of institutions within a specific cultural context’.⁴³

The prominence of the local level mirrors the inadequacy of the national level underscored by some authors. On the one hand, the retrenchment of the welfare state has undercut the role of the central state as a supplier of social services and has led to the resurgence of the local.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the central level does not ensure a meaningful participation of citizens.⁴⁵ On this latter aspect, Bonaiuti⁴⁶ draws on Bobbio’s work to argue that the massive state apparatus, mostly dominated by bureaucrats rather than elected policy-makers, has rendered the establishment of a truly direct democracy difficult, in that the considerable size of institutions forecloses the possibility for citizens to participate directly in a democratic society.

With regard to the spatial arrangements for such a local ecological democracy to take place, a variety of solutions is brought forward: ecocommunities, *demoi*, urban villages and bioregions.⁴⁷ Given the influence exerted on the degrowth political theory, a cursory discussion of these local utopias seems appropriate.

Eco-communities, which span from eco-villages to co-housing experiences, are bottom-up initiatives inspired by ecological values and based on co-living, direct participation in decision-making and sharing practices.⁴⁸ In contributions on degrowth, the theorization of the concept of eco-community largely draws on the work of Bookchin. Deeply rooted in anarchism, Bookchin’s theorization takes a critical stand against the role of the state, seen as a system of power and control exercised by a minority of citizens, and conceives communities as the basic units of an alternative, anti-capitalist, ecological and democratic society.⁴⁹ For this author, the realization of an ‘ecological society’ – that is one that ‘will restore the balance between human society and nature’ – could be achieved only through a process of decentralization of cities and the consequential creation of ‘eco-communities’, ‘artistically molded to the ecosystems in which they are located’.⁵⁰ Such eco-communities should be mistaken neither with rural sparse settlements nor with ‘countercultural communes’, as

[they] must retain the urban tradition in the Hellenic meaning of the term, as a city which is comprehensible and manageable to those who inhabit it, a new polis [...] scaled to human dimension which, in Aristotle’s famous dictum, can be comprehended by everyone in a single view.⁵¹

Therefore, an ecological society would draw on a direct and participatory democracy,⁵² whereby citizens would be directly engaged in the decision-making process.⁵³ However, far from suggesting the need for isolated and autarchic localities, Bookchin argues for the establishment of confederations of municipalities, where the will of the citizens would be ‘mandated to delegates’.⁵⁴

A further source of theoretical inspiration is Fotopoulos’ work, from which degrowth thinkers borrow the idea of ‘*demos*’, a completely self-reliant territorial unit populated by approximately 30,000 inhabitants.⁵⁵ Since several cities broadly exceed this number, they would be split in smaller units, engendering ‘neighbourhood republics’.⁵⁶ Fotopoulos

sees the causes of the ecological crisis in the exercise of powers by the elites, which is the result of the capitalist system and representative democracy.⁵⁷ To overcome this condition, Fotopoulos⁵⁸ proposes ‘the creation of local inclusive democracies in action, which would gradually move resources out of the capitalist market economy and create new political, economic and ecological institutions to replace the present ones’. Taking the cue from Bookchin’s political theory, the *demos* would then unite in confederations.⁵⁹

Another localist utopia that has caught the attention of some advocates of degrowth is the idea of the urban village.⁶⁰ An urban village ‘has the size of a district [...] and is characterized by a mixture of forms of soil occupation – e.g. residential, commercial and public spaces – which offers a diversity of types of residence as well as a variety of infrastructures and functions, guaranteeing a social mixing and a strong interaction between residents’.⁶¹ Urban villages would then be connected with each other through transport networks.⁶² It has been claimed that, by condensing in one place several human activities, multiple benefits would derive: the lowering of the frequency and distance of journeys, consequentially cutting carbon emissions; the collective appropriation of space; the creation of more close-knit communities and so on.⁶³ More importantly, a political system constituted by urban villages would enable ‘a relocalisation of politics through participatory democracy’.⁶⁴

Akin to the urban village is the eco-village, mentioned by some degrowth thinkers as a place where to undertake degrowth initiatives.⁶⁵ The eco-village – which for Cattaneo⁶⁶ constitutes a type of eco-community – is a ‘highly self-sufficient [...] cooperative and self-governing’ territorial form⁶⁷ and constitutes a potential solution for a radical ‘exit from the economy’.⁶⁸ In an eco-village, inhabitants would administrate their economy and their resources and the political life would be regulated by the principles of participatory democracy.⁶⁹ To do so, it would be necessary to create a governing system devolved at sub-local level, where decision-making would be based on consensus.⁷⁰

Another territorial unit recurring in contributions on degrowth is the bioregion – also defined as ‘urban bioregion’ or ‘ecoregion’ – inspired by the philosopher Raimon Panikkar.⁷¹ The rationale of bioregionalism lies in the belief that ‘the “natural” world should determine the political, economic and social life of communities’.⁷² As Sale⁷³ puts it,

We must get to know the land around us, learn its lore and its potential, and live with it and not against it. We must see that living with the land means living in, and according to the ways and rhythms of, its natural regions – its bioregions.

The community is conceived as the organizing unit of the bioregion, which for Sale should not exceed 10,000 inhabitants in order to survive on what the territory has to offer.⁷⁴ Bioregional communities would be self-sufficient, enabling the satisfaction of the demand for basic and some secondary needs.⁷⁵ For Latouche,⁷⁶ a bioregion is ‘a coherent spatial entity that expresses a geographical, social and historical reality, might be predominantly rural or predominantly urban’ and ‘could be described as a municipality of municipalities, a “town of towns” or even a “town of villages”, or in other words an ecopolis’.

Despite the theoretical and programmatic differences, all these localist utopias for the degrowth society share the importance of downshifting and widening the exercise of political power. However, despite a marked local-centric perspective, it should be noted that the political project of degrowth does not dismiss completely the role of a supra-local government. As Latouche explains:⁷⁷

The relationships between the polities within the global village could be regulated by a democracy of cultures, in what might be called a pluriversalist vision. This would not be a world government, but merely an instance of minimal arbitration between sovereign polities with highly divergent systems.

Similarly, Deriu⁷⁸ proposes a ‘plural, dynamic and flexible idea of political authority’, suited to manage the commons to the most adapt scale and foresees ‘transregional or transnational spaces that will help us to “relativise” historical identity belongings and parochial logics and to reason in wider ecological terms’. In this sense, local communities would not be closed systems with no contacts with the outside world. By way of contrast, all the local social and ecological initiatives would be connected creating a network in order to resist globalization.⁷⁹

Despite being one of the key principles of degrowth, the idea of relocalization casts some doubts about its feasibility – and also on its desirability – as will be discussed in the next section.

The challenge of localization: a critique

The degrowth’s localist argument laid out in the previous sections is both pragmatic and theoretical. Drawing on actual practical examples of communal, anti-capitalist and ecological alternatives, degrowth proponents seek to build a persuasive argument about the centrality of the local dimension in the transition towards a degrowth society. Parallel to such pragmatic localism, theoretical accounts on degrowth explore communitarian and deep ecologist localist utopias to identify territorial forms that may suit a degrowth society – as seen in the previous section. The coexistence of the pragmatic and utopian instances of localism reflects the very same nature of the degrowth thinking, presented sometimes as a programme and sometimes as a theory. Latouche himself – perhaps deliberately – is ambivalent on the definition of degrowth: on the one hand, he pledges ‘a policy of degrowth’, on the other, he betrays the practicality of the project labelling it the ‘degrowth utopia’⁸⁰ and in an oxymoronic and provocative way he defines degrowth as a ‘concrete utopia’.⁸¹

The two types of localism detected in the degrowth literature reinforce each other in the attempt to make a strong case for the (re-)localization of economic activities and the decentralization of powers. Nevertheless, localization, both in its pragmatic and ideal version, raises some questions.

As discussed previously, in many contributions on degrowth, local experiences, especially at community level, aimed at addressing social, ecological and economic issues are praised as the living proof that alternatives to capitalism can be realized. It cannot be denied that the wide variety of local initiatives that have been implemented, including intentional communities, cooperatives, local currencies, time banks, urban gardens and the like, are valuable attempts to improve the quality of the environment and the social life of local communities. While such initiatives may produce benefits for the people engaged in them, their effectiveness in term of diffusion and capacity for a systemic change is arguable. This is due to the fact that such anti-capitalist local experiments rest on the continuous commitment of ecologically minded individuals and often rely on limited resources, making it difficult to sustain them over time. In this respect, Cattaneo⁸² admits that no evidence on the consumption levels of eco-communities has been

produced to date. Similarly, research on local currencies has not provided substantive evidence of their effectiveness.⁸³ In this sense, it appears that the argument for localization is normatively assumed, rather than supported by compelling evidence.

Connected to the issue about the effectiveness of degrowth initiatives is their capacity to upscale and unite to trigger a systemic change – an aspect that for Kallis et al.⁸⁴ should be explored by further research. Degrowth proponents acknowledge this criticism. As Schneider et al.⁸⁵ observe, most of the small to medium-scale degrowth initiatives take place ‘at the fringe of the market economy’, and in other cases they do not challenge the dominant system through the provision of an alternative model. Likewise, Calvário and Otero,⁸⁶ describing the back-to-the landers movement, recognize that this movement may be limited by its local dimension, failing to bring about a systemic change in the agri-food sector. Nonetheless, for these authors, this issue is not insurmountable and the solution lies in creation of networks among local actors.⁸⁷ Theoretically drawing on the confederation of communities of anarchist mould, the idea of creating inter-local networks is often invoked by degrowth proponents as a solution to overcoming the localist trap. For instance, Cattaneo⁸⁸ hypothesizes the creation of ‘bottom-bottom networks’ that would gradually enable more people to abandon ‘the system’ and hence lead to reducing the clout of the governing elite. Concrete examples, such as Slowcities, the Italian New Municipality Network and the Transition Towns, are brought forward as the tangible proof of the feasibility of locally based ecological democracies inter-connected through network arrangements.⁸⁹ These inter-urban networks do play an important role in promoting a more ecologically and socially sustainable urban alternative against the paradigm of the ever-growing city. However, some authors have raised some concerns about these initiatives, especially on their allegedly participatory and democratic nature. For instance, it has been noted that a significant issue for the Cittáslow movement is to engage the residents beyond activists and members of local public institutions and private organizations.⁹⁰ Even further, the Transition Towns movement has been criticized for its ‘quite rigid, top-down and [...] inherently undemocratic management structure’.⁹¹

As discussed above, the pragmatic localism underlying many contributions on degrowth is complemented by the utopian speculations on alternative spatial forms for the degrowth society. The fascination of imaginary places, where a new and better life could set up, is rooted in a long-standing tradition of utopian political thought and literary works, which finds its prominent precursors in More’s *Utopia*⁹² and Campanella’s *Città Del Sole*.⁹³ In a more recent period, the myth of the community can be traced in the work of several authors writing in late 19th-early 20th centuries: Geddes’ organic eutopia, Le Play’s ruralism, the neo-medievalism of Sitte, Pugin, Ruskin and Morris; the decentralized anarchism of Kropotkin and Olmsted’s landscape and Howard’s garden city.⁹⁴ In a similar fashion, through the incorporation of deep ecologist and anarchist proposals, degrowth theory contemplates the creation of fictitious communities to solve the social and ecological crisis our society is undergoing, being they eco-communities, urban villages or bioregions. However, just like previous communitarian proposals, the degrowth theory may fail in its goal of proposing an alternative to the neoliberal city. In effect, the creation ex nihilo of a community would not be an easy task and the actual results may not often mirror the theoretical archetype of the imaginary community. As Harvey observes,⁹⁵ the idea that any social issues can be resolved by manipulating the urban space is illusory. Communitarian proposals draw upon a salvific concept of community, deemed capable

of solving the malaise of contemporary cities.⁹⁶ While favouring face-to-face relations and direct participation, community life may spawn separateness and isolation and even, as Harvey notes, marginalization, segregation and discrimination.⁹⁷ Although many communal experiences have the potential to fuel deep transformations, their practices often hinge on a ‘change by example’, which may not appeal many people and hence failing to trigger radical changes.⁹⁸ Surely, lifestyles based on conviviality, sharing, and individual engagement in the community can undoubtedly bring about positive changes for citizens.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, this does not mean that other social arrangements should be discarded. As Ott¹⁰⁰ puts it, ‘[h]ardly anybody would like to replace the modern welfare state by trust in solidarities of neighbourhoods or networks of friends’.

More importantly, contributions on degrowth fall short of providing a thorough (and convincing) explanation of how cities, especially big urban agglomerations, which are the hubs of the capitalist system, could be converted from ‘growth machines’¹⁰¹ to degrowing places. In this respect, Latouche¹⁰² concedes that ‘[w]e still live in productivist cities, devised and organised around vehicles and in shapes that are claimed to be rational’. Being ‘loci of industrial production; centres of command and control over inter-urban, interstate and global circuits of capital; and sites of exchange within local, regional, national and global markets’,¹⁰³ cities are the key places in which to start a radical change in the consumerist mindset. In effect, the achievement of radical cultural changes in metropolitan conurbations would destabilize the capitalist system. As Harvey¹⁰⁴ observes, cities have been the nodes of capital creation and therefore, improving conditions in cities could lead to a significant economic impact. However, it is questionable whether community-level initiatives as those promoted by degrowthists would be powerful enough to undermine capitalism in cities.

Furthermore, by placing emphasis on the sub-local level, conceived as the seedbed of a new – and better – society, the degrowth theory subsumes an underlying contempt for metropolises and big cities. As some authors note, the marked accent on localization appears to conceal an anti-urbanist view.¹⁰⁵ According to Harvey,¹⁰⁶ the anti-urbanism – and the parallel pledge for a rural communitarianism – that characterizes many contemporary environmental movements – hinges on a ‘fetishistic conception of “nature” as something to be valued and worshipped separate from human action’. Additionally, as mentioned previously, the city is seen as the culprit of environmental problems. On a closer look, the seemingly negative environmental impact of cities is not that much related to urban spatial configuration, but it is the outcome of diffuse personal attitudes of the urban population.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Romano¹⁰⁸ questions the very same compatibility between the ‘localist fetishism’, lying at the hearth of degrowth, and democracy – which is one of its pillars. For Romano, it is unlikely that democracy could be exercised within communities with a numerically pre-established population, in that this would require the curtailment of people’s free movement in order to maintain mid-sized communities.¹⁰⁹ As Romano notes, a flaw of the theory of degrowth lies in its intrinsic ‘ontology of spontaneity’,¹¹⁰ evident in the implicit assumption that citizens in autonomous and democratic communities would choose frugality. This criticism resonates with Harvey’s judgement on communitarian thinking, whose fundamental mistake lies in the idea that

community, often understood as a naturally occurring entity, indeed exists or can exist [...] and that this entity, endowed with causal salving powers, can be put to work as an agent for

social change. Even when understood as something socially constructed, communitarianism incorporates mythic beliefs that a ‘thing’ called community can be created as some free-standing and autonomous entity endowed with causative and salving powers.¹¹¹

Such an idyllic conceptualization of the community is exemplified by the image of the local drawn by Singleton.¹¹² Rejecting any accusations of a ‘return to the fetters of communitarianism’ moved by the detractors of degrowth, this author argues that degrowth proponents aspire to a return to

an organic ‘reweaving’ of the local (allowing people to spend more time together, as they did until the 1960s, thanks to, amongst other things, village schools and ‘family’ firms, local shops and local cinemas rather than spending their lives shuttling between schools, industrial zones and out-of-town supermarkets).¹¹³

Another moot point of the utopian localism of the degrowth theory is the idea of community self-reliance. In brief, the concept of self-reliance means that the local territory would host those production activities essential to the inhabitants. In effect, the enhancement of the self-reliance of urban regions would yield considerable environmental and economic benefits, such as lowering the costs for transportation and the level of pollution, in that it would close the distance between the hubs of production and the places of consumption.¹¹⁴ However, in a contemporary society, the concept of essential goods is quite broad and encompasses the consumption of those goods and services that are not fundamental to human survival – communication, technology, culture, entertainment etc. Even in an ideal non-capitalist scenario, where the economic competition among firms and the consumerist culture are contained, it seems unlikely that a small parcel of territory would be able to accommodate a consistent portion of the production of goods and services to satisfy societal needs. For instance, small localities do not usually host industries producing high-tech or innovative goods and services; hence, to enable their inhabitants to consume such products, it is necessary to intensify the use of transports, which in turn offsets other potential environmental gains. To overcome this problem, there might be two options. The first one requires a dramatic change of consumption patterns in terms of quantity and types of products in order to minimize the transportation of goods and services. The second option entails the inclusion within the local boundaries of those production activities considered as fundamental. This means that the portion of land should be wide enough – and perhaps wider than a community – to host production activities. While the second option goes against the same logic of the eco-community, the first one raises ethical issues related to who would establish what needs are fundamental.¹¹⁵ In other words, a radical shift in consumption patterns requires a cultural change, which would probably be neither socially acceptable nor possible in a short time frame.

In order to avoid being mistaken for advocates of backward, exclusionary communities living in a state of deprivation, degrowth thinkers propose, on the one hand, the creation of broad spatial units, such as bioregions, characterized by a high degree of functional heterogeneity and on the other hand, the connections of local degrowth initiatives in networks. Nonetheless, the feasibility of these solutions raises some doubts. For instance, the creation of bioregions posits questions about how their boundaries would be drawn and who should be in charge of drawing them.¹¹⁶ Additionally, it is deemed that networks would have the function of enhancing and diffusing degrowth

practices with the ultimate aim of overthrowing capitalism.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is arguable whether these networks would be big and strong enough to oppose the capitalist system and its neoliberal elites, and that these would not peg back the advancement of a degrowth counter-culture.

The discussion set out above sheds light on the main limits of the local-centric perspective central to the theory of degrowth. Nonetheless, this article does not seek to confute in toto the localist argument made by degrowth proponents. Notably, the decentralization of powers and competencies enables local governments to implement policies that better address local issues. However, it cannot be denied that the intervention of the central state may be fundamental to monitor economic activities and to take the lead in the pursue of social and ecological sustainability.¹¹⁸ Moreover, although the local is conceived as the most appropriate scale for the degrowth transition, some matters – such as climate change – have to be unavoidably addressed at higher levels of government.¹¹⁹ Notwithstanding, as Kallis admits,¹²⁰ the divergence in the degrowth theory between the local and the global has not yet been fully resolved.

Taking a critical stand on the emphasis on the local level placed by degrowth proponents, alternative arrangements for an ecologically sustainable and socially just society have been proposed. For instance, Xue¹²¹ suggests a ‘multi-scalar strategy’ to implement policies favourable to degrowth, whereby different policy-making functions would be allocated to the most appropriate administrative levels. This proposition resonates with the idea of a ‘polycentric system’ proposed by Elinor Ostrom to organize the governance of climate change, whereby ‘multiple public and private organizations at multiple scales jointly affect collective benefits and costs’.¹²² Ultimately, as Schumacher¹²³ puts it, the most suitable spatial level is defined by the aims we are seeking to achieve, since the ‘duality of human requirement’ entails that ‘man needs many different structures, both small ones and large ones’.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, the local-centred perspective of the degrowth theory has been discussed by pointing out the theoretical and practical drawbacks of this approach. The theory of degrowth has had the merit of spawning a debate about potential alternatives to the consumerist paradigm, strongly criticizing the dogma of the necessity and desirability of the continuous growth.

Whereas the preference of degrowth advocates for the local dimension over other scales takes its cue from a long-standing stream of political thought, it bears some limitations in terms of theoretical reliability and practical feasibility. Degrowth thinkers promote local experiments deviating from the capitalist path as forms of constructive resistance fighting the consumerist logic and constituting small but important contributions towards a society increasingly less dependent on economic growth. Whereas many local examples show that changes towards a more frugal society can be realized, they are not enough to trigger a broader and more radical change. And a paradigm-shifting revolution is deemed paramount to building a degrowth society. As a result, the centrality of the local level in the achievement of a degrowth society should not be overstated.

In line with much of green and anarchist thought, the degrowth literature indulges in the praise of smallness and the local as the way out of capitalism, which thrives on big

agglomerations and on the absence of geographical horizons. However, degrowth proponents tend to gloss over the process of how to achieve such local ecological democracy and whether this form of government is really beneficial, dwelling instead on the advantages of a decentralized and localized economic and political system. As in communitarian theoretical accounts, the underlying flaw is the normative conception of the community as an idyllic place where individuals can thrive and engage in altruistic, solidaristic and ecological activities. Such idyllic picture rules out the – realistic – possibility of creating backward, close-minded and repressive communities which, in the attempt to defend their autonomy and identity, may exclude everything and anyone that does not conform to the dominant *doxa*.

In this sense, the local-centric approach of the degrowth theory hinges on the assumption that the local level is endowed with a superior social and political ethos that makes it the optimal scale on where to start the degrowth revolution. In other words, it is taken for granted that local degrowth initiatives may achieve more in environmental and social terms than the policies implemented by nation-states or agreements reached by international organizations. However, it cannot be overlooked the fact that localities are embedded in a capitalist system; therefore, expanding the breadth and the efficacy of the competencies of local authorities does not automatically lead to the creation of an economic and political system geared towards the principles of degrowth. In effect, discourses of local development are often driven by the logic of economic growth.¹²⁴ And beyond any idyllic conception of the local, Latouche warns against the existence of a ‘rapacious localism’, whenever local economic powers exploit the territory.¹²⁵

Albeit endeavouring to prove that the transition towards a degrowth society can happen, either through the wide diffusion of degrowth initiatives implemented at local level or through the creation of ad hoc territorial units, degrowth proponents fail to construct a persuasive argument about the scalability of such experiences that is capable of going beyond the communitarian utopia. All in all, the weakest element of degrowth is the thin theorization of a political system for a degrowth society and how to build it – and theoretical borrowings from ecological and radical thinkers barely offset the lack of a sound theoretical framework.

Notes

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